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how to



cope with
student life

How to cope with student life

This booklet is for anyone experiencing a mental health problem who is a student or considering becoming one. It gives information about how you can look after your mental health while studying, what sources of support are available and how your friends and family can help.



This information is authored by Nicola Byrom, founder and trustee of Student Minds.

Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity. We empower students with the knowledge, confidence and skills to look after their own mental health and support others through our national network of university groups. One conversation at a time, we will transform the state of student mental health.

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About student mental health

Studying is likely to bring a number of changes to your life. Hopefully it should be enjoyable and interesting, but it can also be challenging – especially if you're also living with a mental health problem. You might face challenges like:

- meeting and working with new people
- exams, deadlines for written work or presentations
- managing your own finances
- coping with homesickness
- balancing the demands of studying with other commitments
- maintaining relationships with family and old friends
- leaving home, finding new housing and living with new people.

Coping with new challenges can have an impact on your mental health, but there are lots of things that you can do to make your time as a student easier and more enjoyable.

👩👩 *The tutors who I chose to open up to were supportive. It was as a result of asking for help that I realised that with a few adjustments I would be able to finish my course, and nobody thought any less of me.* 👩👩

Students are also at somewhat higher risk of developing mental health problems. This could be because of:

- **Your age** – many students are young people, and for many people this is the age when you first develop a mental health problem.
- **Stress** – becoming a student can be a stressful experience. Although stress isn't a mental health problem, it can lead to mental health problems like depression and anxiety. See Mind's booklet *How to manage stress* for more information.
- **Lack of support** – you might have left home for the first time, or just don't have enough time to see your friends and family. Not having a good support network can make you vulnerable to developing a mental health problem.

How can I choose my course?

Choosing the right course for you can make it easier to cope with student life. Higher education is a fantastic opportunity for new experiences, however the demands of student life can be a challenge for all.

Full-time, part-time or online?

Some subjects and some universities will only offer full-time courses, however universities are becoming increasingly flexible. If you don't think the full-time route is for you, there are other options. Many universities offer part-time courses or online options.

	Benefits	Challenges
Full-time	<p>There may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more support from other students and tutors. • more structure to help keep you motivated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This could be a new and different environment for you. • The course may be less flexible. • You may be less able to set your own pace of study.
Part-time	<p>This could help you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work alongside your studies. • manage other responsibilities. • have time for medical appointments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The course will usually take longer to complete. • It may be difficult to concentrate on your studies if you are juggling other priorities.
Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't have to live near or travel to the university very often. • You may be able to complete work at your own pace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may need to be more self-motivated to complete your work. • It may be harder to meet course-mates, which could leave you feeling isolated.

How will I study?

Different courses will require you to do different kinds of work. It's useful to think about what kind of work you'd like in your course.

- **Exams, coursework or presentations?** While many courses focus on exams, some will assess your work through coursework and placements. This may be helpful if you find dealing with the pressure of exams very challenging.
- **Is there a year abroad?** This usually involves spending a year living in another country. You might like the idea of getting to travel with some structures of university in place to support you, or you may find it hard to move away from your support network and any treatment you're receiving. Student Minds provides more information about planning and managing a year abroad (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).
- **Is there a work placement?** This may be essential for some vocational courses, e.g. teaching, medicine, nursing, or an opportunity to learn about an industry and build up skills and contacts. You might find this a good opportunity to get used to a working environment, or you may find the change more difficult to manage.
- **How many contact hours are there?** Courses vary in the number of contact hours they provide. A high number of contact hours can feel demanding, but courses with few contact hours place a high responsibility on you to structure your own independent study.

💡💡 *Some practical courses can be difficult to cope with if you suffer from something like anxiety. Studying Journalism, which requires me to interview people, has been really difficult.* 💡💡

Where do I want to live?

Deciding where to live during your course can make a big difference to how you find your student experience. Here are some useful things to consider:

- **Do I want to stay at home?** Staying at home may provide more support if you have an established support network, and make it easier to continue to get any treatment you're currently receiving.
- **Do I want to move away?** This might be necessary to study at your preferred university, and it might make it easier for you to engage with all aspects of university life.
- **Is it easy to travel home from university?** Being able to travel home easily could help you take short breaks if you are feeling homesick or the university environment is challenging.

What sort of university do I want?

All universities have their own atmosphere. Checking the university and Students' Union website, or joining an open day, can help you get a feel for this.

- At a **campus university**, most buildings (including halls of residence) are close together. A campus may provide a stronger community, making it easier to meet other students, but – depending on the location – it can make it harder to access shops and other amenities.
- At **non-campus universities** the buildings might be spaced out across a city. This can make it easier to access amenities, and have more of an independent life outside your university, but can also involve a longer commute or travelling between buildings.
- **Larger universities** with big student numbers could feel intimidating, or less personal, but they might also have more support available for students and larger Students' Unions, providing a wider range of extracurricular activities.
- **Smaller universities** may specialise in certain courses and provide teaching in smaller groups, but may have fewer opportunities for socialising or offer fewer student support services.

What support can I get?

The support offered by different universities and local NHS services can differ, so it's useful to think about what kind of support you would find helpful.

- Almost all universities provide a **counselling service** but can usually only provide a limited number of sessions, and they're unlikely to offer specialised talking treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (see Mind's online booklet *Making sense of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)* for more information).
- Some universities employ a **Mental Health Adviser** to provide ongoing support to students with mental health problems. You can find out more from the University Mental Health Advisers Network (UMHAN) (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).
- Different **NHS mental health services** offer different types of support – for example, different talking treatments or support groups. See the NHS service finder to search for local services ('Useful contacts' p.33).
- NHS services have different rules about whether you can **refer yourself** to them, or if you need your doctor to refer you.

What if I don't make the grade?

If you don't achieve your university or college's offer grade – don't panic. This is not uncommon. If you've been unwell at school, you may be in a position where you haven't been able to perform as well as you expected, or you haven't completed enough courses to apply for the subject you want to study.

There are several options to consider:

- If you are concerned about how your mental health might affect your grades, talk to the university or college admissions office as soon as they offer you a place to discuss your concerns. There is a possibility that they may be able to be flexible with your offer grade.
- If you don't get the grades you were expecting, the UCAS clearing system offers students a second chance. The UCAS website has lots

of information on how this system works (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

- If you'd like to study a course at university that you are not currently prepared for, you may find that further study is helpful. For instance, the Access to Higher Education Diploma is a qualification that prepares people for higher education (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).

How can I decide?

You don't have to make any decisions on your own – there are lots of ways to get support. You could:

- talk to your school careers office
- contact a university or college's admissions office – they will usually be able to help you consider your options and will be happy to provide more detailed guidance
- use an online forum, such as The Student Room, to get advice from other students (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

How can I prepare?

How you prepare to start a new course will depend on what, where and how you've chosen to study. Starting something new is a challenge for most people, but there are lots of things that you can plan for in advance to make the transition easier.

Preparing to study

Studying can be demanding so it is natural to feel anxious about this at first. To help you feel in control, it is useful to get as much information as possible about what is expected of you, and what is available to help you with the course. Try to find out:

- How and when will my work be assessed?
- How many lectures, seminars, lab sessions or other appointments will I be expected to attend?

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- How many written tasks will I be expected to complete?
- Will I have to give presentations or explain my work?

Where can I find this information?

You might get this information from:

- an information pack before you start
- an internal website, such as WebLearn or BlackBoard
- a course handbook that sets out what is required of students and how work is assessed, including mark schemes
- the library or an internal website may give you access to past exam papers, to give you a feel for the course
- a course timetable – this may vary between weeks
- your academic tutor or course administrator.

Getting used to a new environment

Taking time to get used to the new environment may help you feel more relaxed. Try to:

- find places where you'll need to study, such as the library, laboratories or venues for your lectures and classes.
- find the Students' Union and check out what they have to offer.
- find out how to get important books or other equipment that many people on your course are likely to need at the same time.
- learn how to access IT services or, if you use your own, is there a student network or intranet you should log into?

“What I found hard was having to make friends and get on with my flatmates, and adjust to communal life, which is often noisy and stressful. Also overcoming shyness in order to talk to classmates.”

Where will I live?

If you are moving away from home, you will need to arrange accommodation. You may be able to stay in halls of residence, or you may

prefer to find your own housing. Think about what kind of accommodation you'd like.

- **Catered accommodation.** You might prefer this so you don't have to worry about food and cooking, and you may have more opportunities to get to know other students.
- **Self-catered accommodation.** This may give you more personal space and independence, and might be cheaper as you can budget for your food yourself.
- **Off-campus accommodation.** Some universities may offer smaller self-catering properties, which provide a more independent lifestyle. If you don't want to live in halls, you can also choose to find your own accommodation.

Building a new social life

Finding new friends and building a social life is a big part of starting your course, and can be a challenge for everyone in the first few weeks. Try to take things at a pace you are comfortable with, and make time to look after yourself too. You could:

- leave your door open while you are in your room – this will invite people to pop in and say hello
- be on hand in the kitchen to boil a kettle and share a cup of tea
- ask your hall/flatmates if they'd like to explore the campus or town centre
- introduce yourself to the stranger you are sat next in lectures
- join a society at your Students' Union – many have taster sessions at the start of the year.

If you are studying online or doing a distance learning course, try to make contact with fellow students. This may be through an online community that your course has set up, or through informal groups on social media.

For more ideas, check out the Student Minds guide to starting university (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).

Coping with homesickness

Many students feel homesick in the first few weeks at university. It is natural to feel unsettled and it might take time before you feel at home in your new environment. Here are some things you can try:

- make your new room your own – put up posters or add a blanket to your bed
- keep busy with new opportunities – give an event or society a go
- offer to make your new flatmates a hot drink – you never know, they might be feeling homesick, too.

Planning your health care

If you're currently receiving treatment for a mental health problem and you register with a new GP, the support you get may change. You may have new assessments and your new GP may advise on a new treatment plan. To minimise the disruption, it can help to plan early – even as soon as you've chosen a course or accepted a place.

Talk to your **current GP** about:

- the move and the implications for your treatment
- how your medical notes will be transferred and what they can do to ensure that your new GP understands your medical needs
- reviewing any medication you are taking that may affect your studies
- writing a summary letter about your medical history for your new GP.

Speak to the **admissions office** at your uni about:

- the GP practice that students use – this may be an on-campus practice
- contacting a University Mental Health Advisor who can support your transition to university.

For more information on telling your university about a diagnosed mental health problem, and what protection you have, see the University Mental Health Advisers Network website (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).

Managing your finances

Studying is likely to affect your personal finances. The money you receive and the way you get it may change. It is important to think about how you will pay for essentials like food, housing, tuition fees and course costs such as books and other equipment.

●● *[I try to] be sensible with my spending where possible – I always ensure I can afford to eat well but do leave enough to treat myself from time to time.* ●●

Some things to consider:

- Will you have a reduced income from work? For example, will you be working fewer hours?
- Will you still be entitled to any benefits that you have previously received? Speak to your benefits office, Job Centre Plus or Citizen's Advice for more information (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).
- Will you have to pay council tax? Check with your local council to find out about any discounts.
- Are you eligible for a tuition fee or maintenance loan? Check out the UCAS website for more information on tuition fees and student loans and how to apply (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).
- Does the college or university you are studying at have hardship funds, scholarships or other funding you can access? Your Students' Union Advice Service may have further information about specific support at your college or university.

Check out The Money Charity's Student Money Manual for more advice on managing your finances (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

●● *I do part-time university with The Open University, so I have a full-time job alongside. It helps a lot.* ●●

How can I manage my studies?

At university or college, you may find that you have more responsibility for your own study than you have been used to. This can provide flexibility in how you structure your day, but getting used to planning your own study can be a challenge.

How can I get organised?

Planning your study schedule can help you feel less stressed and more in control of your workload. You may find it helpful to keep track of your commitments and plan ahead. You could use a written planner, an online calendar or an app.

- Find out when your **deadlines and exams** are and start planning your time and preparing for assessments in advance. You may be able to predict when you'll be busier and plan around this.
- **Avoid last-minute work crises** by working backwards from a deadline to think about what work needs to be completed when. Setting mini personal deadlines can help break down larger projects.
- **Keep other responsibilities and commitments in mind.** If you are part of a sports team or society, think about how you will balance these commitments. It helps to plan ahead and remind the team or society when your work deadlines are.
- Think about times when you might **struggle with your mental health**. For example, anxiety around an anniversary or another regular event, or you may need reflection or recovery time after therapy sessions or other appointments.
- **Inform your tutor** of times when it is likely that you will not **be able to complete as much work**. Tutors are likely to be able to be more flexible when informed in advance.
- **Plan time for yourself.** While both academic work and social occasions are an important part of the student experience, it's useful to plan for breaks to look after yourself.

●● If I have a significant amount of things I have to do, I can often feel overwhelmed. This can prevent me from getting anything done at all. ●●

How do I stick to structure?

Having less structure can make it tricky to focus and get down to work. Building a daily routine that gives you focused time to work can make it easier to carry on when you feel low on motivation. Ask yourself:

- Do you find it easier to work at certain times of the day? Planning your daily schedule can help you avoid having to work at times that don't suit you.
- Do you find it easier to work in certain places? You might find it helpful to work in a library to separate your studies from your social life.
- How long can you concentrate for? Most of us need regular breaks. Scheduling these in can help you work more effectively.

How can I make the most of lectures?

Lectures can feel daunting, as a lot of information is covered in a short period of time, and missing lectures can make it harder to study effectively. Here are some strategies you might use to make lectures easier to manage:

- If you need to miss a lecture, ask a friend or course mate to record the lecture.
- If you are finding it difficult to get to all your lectures, talk to your tutor or academic supervisor as soon as possible to find out if there's anything they can do to ensure you don't miss too much information.
- Recording lectures may be helpful, even if you are able to attend, as it can be helpful to know that you can listen to the lecture again if you need to. Make sure you ask your lecturer if it is okay to record the lecture!
- If you know the lecture topic, it can help to read up in advance.

Am I studying effectively?

Everyone has a different way of studying. Comparing yourself to others might leave you wondering whether you are going about things the right way – but different methods work for different people, so find out what works best for you.

- If you think you could be doing things differently, test this out and see if a change helps.
- More hours of work don't always equate to better grades – taking breaks can help you to concentrate better.
- Try to find out exactly what you do need to know and stay focused on this.

If you are not getting a lot of feedback on your work, it can be hard to know if you're working the right way or studying effectively. You can:

- talk to your academic tutor or supervisor about this
- use online resources to help you understand how you can study more effectively – try the Open University's Study Skills resources (see 'Useful contacts' p.33)
- check if your university runs courses on how to study effectively.

What if things don't go to plan?

Sometimes things don't go as you expected. This can be a challenge, but it happens to everyone. You might find it helpful to:

- have an alternate work schedule if your day or week's routine is disrupted
- schedule in 'spare time' so that you catch up if necessary
- talk to your tutor about extensions or flexible arrangements in advance, so that you feel comfortable talking to them if things are not going to plan.

●● *The important thing [for me is] to remind myself that I can't necessarily compete with classmates who are mentally well – so there is no point in beating myself up if I take longer to do things.* ●●

How can I cope with exams?

Almost all courses will have formal examinations and assessed work as a way of monitoring progress and grading qualifications. Most people feel some anxiety about what mark they will receive, and almost everyone feels significant pressure before exams, but there are lots of things you can do to help yourself cope.

Get organised

It's a good idea to have all the information about the exams you will be taking as soon as possible, so you can make a plan for coping with them. You may want to:

- **Confirm how you will be examined** – find out what kind of assessments there will be and when they will be.
- **Look at past papers.** You can usually find past exam papers in your college or university library or on an internal website. If you have assessed coursework, you may be able to see example essays or reports from previous years.
- Make sure you know which parts of your course will have **formal exams** and what will be assessed by **coursework**. If you are not sure, speak to your academic supervisor, tutor or your department's academic administrator.
- **Get a copy of the syllabus** or a guide to what content you are expected to know.
- Make sure you have **caught up** if you have been absent for any significant topics.
- **Keep your notes** in an **organised** format that works for you, so you can look back at them.
- **Remind friends and housemates that you have exams** and they may need to be patient with you. Where necessary, you may want to ask that a quiet space, for example your bedroom, is particularly respected at exam time.

💡💡 *I didn't cope well during exams. I threw myself into them without revising and made myself ill.* 💡💡

Plan a revision timetable

Try to start your revision in plenty of time. Take time to plan a revision timetable that:

- is linked to your exam timetable, so you revise subjects in the right order
- is realistic and flexible, in case of any unexpected events
- shows your priorities clearly – distinguishing between ‘things I have to get done’ and ‘things I’d like to get done’ can help you see what can be dropped if you’re feeling under pressure
- balances your revision with other demands on your time, e.g. meals, sleep, chores or other commitments
- takes into account your best time of day for studying – think about when you find it easiest to sleep or if you are taking medication that affects when you can concentrate
- includes plenty of time for breaks.

Manage your triggers

If you have previously experienced anxiety or become unwell in stressful situations, you might find that exams and assessments can be a trigger for you. It’s natural for this to happen, but you may want to prepare. Here are some things you can do:

- **Take time to relax** – no-one can study all day every day. You may find it easier to study effectively if you take regular breaks and factor relaxation time into your revision timetable.
- **Stay flexible** – even the best made plans can be disrupted by unexpected events or the realisation that you are going to have to spend more time on a topic than you thought you needed. Planning your revision timetable with some spare space will help you feel calm when you need to make changes.
- **Keep doing the things that matter** – whether it is phoning home, meeting friends for supper, taking time to play sport or watching a film. Your routine at university may be important in helping you manage your mental health. While you may need to cut

back on social activities during exam periods, it is important that you keep some of your routine, especially when things get stressful.

- **Look after your physical health** – eating well, sleeping and getting outside for a walk or other exercise is important to keep you feeling good.

Student Minds' resource on Exam Stress has more ideas for looking after yourself at exam time (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

●● *I tell myself to ensure I am prepared, breathe, and do the best I can.* ●●

How can I cope with the student lifestyle?

For most people, studying is a time where they socialise with a wide range of people and have many new experiences. While this can be positive, it can also feel overwhelming.

Managing stress

You might feel like there is a lot of pressure to do well academically, as well as pressure to be sociable. Try to build up strategies to manage stress before it gets too much, so it's easier to respond to additional pressure – for example, around exam times.

- Try using a planner to keep track of deadlines and key commitments and organise your study.
- Take time out to relax. Getting away from your desk, even for short periods of time, can help keep you calm.
- Keep an eye on social commitments to avoid overloading your schedule around deadlines and exams.

See Mind's booklet *How to manage stress* for more information, or the Student Minds course Positive Minds for ideas on keeping your university experience positive (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

Looking after your physical health

Looking after your physical health will help you stay healthy and maintain concentration to study well.

- **Get good sleep.** If you're tired, your worries can get blown out of proportion. Getting into a regular sleep routine can help you stay on top of university life. See Mind's online booklet *How to cope with sleep problems* for more information.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Eating a balanced and nutritious diet can help you feel well and think clearly. See Mind's online booklet on *Exploring food and mood* for more tips. The Student Minds blog The Kitchen has ideas for cooking on a student budget (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).
- **Exercise regularly.** Keeping active can help you improve your mental health. Even gentle exercise, like yoga or swimming, can help you relax and manage stress. See Mind's booklet *How to improve your wellbeing through physical activity and sport* for more information.

💡💡 *Tiredness is one of the biggest problems with the student lifestyle and it can contribute significantly to my mood. I feel more emotional and less capable when I am tired.* 💡💡

Managing drugs and alcohol

While alcohol is often associated with the student lifestyle, you don't have to drink if you don't want to. Most Students' Unions offer a range of social events and activities that are alcohol-free. Remember:

- Alcohol can worsen depression and cause other health problems.
- Try to ensure you have some days without drinking.
- Be careful if you are taking medication, as it's usually recommended not to drink while taking it.

For more information about alcohol, see:

- Drink Aware – for further information on alcohol support services
- Best Night Ever – the Student Minds campaign, celebrating quiet nights in

- Mind's online booklet *Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs and alcohol*.

Illegal drugs can also have a serious impact on your mental health. See Mind's online booklet *Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs and alcohol* for more information or Frank for confidential information and advice.

(See 'Useful contacts' on p.33)

Living with other students

If you have moved away from home, it is likely that at some point you will have to organise your own housing. You may not always feel you have a lot of choice, but you could think about if you want to live:

- with people who you can talk to about your mental health
- with a smaller number of people, perhaps in a smaller house
- closer to campus or somewhere with better transport links
- near shops and amenities to make it easier to be sociable
- somewhere quiet with more privacy.

Renting a house or flat for the first time is a big deal, but there is plenty of advice and support out there. Check with your university or Students' Union if they provide advice about accommodation, managing landlords and signing contracts. You can also contact Unipol, the student housing charity (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

Meeting new people

Being around so many other students creates a great opportunity to meet like-minded people. If you are finding it hard to meet new people, remember many other students will feel the same way. Here are some suggestions to help you get started:

- **Volunteering** can help you meet people who share an interest with you. Your Students' Union may be able to help you do this.

- **Clubs or societies** can be a great way to get to know people and create a work-life balance. See what's on offer at the fresher's fair or, if you missed this, you can find out from your Students' Union at any time.
- **Course forums** or email groups can keep you connected if you're studying online. Getting to know people online can also make it easier if the course has events like study weekends where you will all meet.

💡💡 *I don't have the usual student lifestyle because I know that would make me ill. Open University is great for people like me for that reason.* 💡💡

Loneliness

Lots of students feel lonely. Social media can give the impression that all of your friends are hanging out together and having the best time, all the time. This comparison can make you feel lonelier, and loneliness can have a big impact on your mental health.

- Take social media with a pinch of salt – people usually only post photos of the positive times on social media, giving a false impression of how great things are.
- Even if you are shy, remember your peers are often in the same situation and appreciate you talking to them. Perhaps you could:
 - talk to someone, or just say hello, before and after each lecture or class
 - meet classmates in the library to plan a joint piece of work
 - chat to people you are living with while making food in a shared kitchen
- Try peer support. There might be groups at your university specifically for students who are experiencing mental health problems.

See Mind's online booklet *How to cope with loneliness* for more tips. For more ideas about coping with the student lifestyle, check out the Mind Matters resource from Student Minds (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

What support can I get?

There are many different individuals and organisations who can offer you support. If possible, it is helpful to put this support in place when things are going well, so that it is easy for you to ask for help if you start to find things more difficult. Try thinking about who you feel comfortable talking to.

Support from your university

An academic contact

Your university or college should assign you an academic supervisor or tutor to provide support and advice about your studies. If your tutor knows about your mental health, they may be able to support you in your studies, and help you access further academic support.

- Some tutors will be pro-active about meeting their students but with others, you may have to contact them to arrange a meeting. Remember, they are there to support you, so don't feel shy about taking the first step.
- Talking to your tutor early can help ensure that the right support is in place so that if things do get tricky, they understand how they can support you.
- Your department may have a welfare or disability liaison who you can talk to about your mental health, if you don't feel comfortable talking to your tutor.

The college or university disability service

Your university or college may have a disability support service who can support you to manage any health problem that affects your studies. You can arrange a meeting with this service to discuss any challenges that you might have with your studies, and look at what support the service can provide. The service may be able to arrange:

- mentoring – this might be with another student or a disability specialist

How to cope with student life

- study skills training – such as courses in coping with stress or planning work
- specific arrangements – for your assessments or exams.

UMHAN provides more information about the support you could be entitled to (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).

Your college or university counselling service

Most universities have a counselling service providing support to students for free. They can offer advice about your circumstances independently of your academic tutors or your GP. You can usually self-refer to a university counselling service, so you don't need to see your GP first or have a medical diagnosis.

Your Students' Union

Your Students' Union may have a welfare officer or a Student Advice Service offering free and independent advice or support. They can also refer you to external support.

Student Advice Services are staffed by elected student representatives who have received additional training, or Students' Union staff members who may have experience or training in specific areas such as law or mental health. Students' Unions and the staff they employ are independent of the university or college, although usually based in the same buildings.

Support outside university

Your GP

Your GP can support you by:

- prescribing medication
- referring you to local services
- helping you access treatment for your mental health.

If you don't have a diagnosis but are concerned about your mental health, you can always speak to your GP about this. See Mind's booklet *The Mind guide to seeking help for a mental health problem* for more information on support from your GP.

You can also find more advice from the NHS on student health on NHS Choices Live Well (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

Organisations and charities

There are some charities and organisations who specifically work with students and young people, and could offer you support:

- Student Minds offer support for students and run peer support groups across the country.
- Students Against Depression offer information and advice for students experiencing depression.
- Nightline confidential telephone support offered overnight at universities across the country.
- Young Minds offer information and support to young people experiencing mental health problems.

Voluntary organisations and charities also provide support to students, as well as members of public. For example, you might want support from:

- Citizens Advice – gives support on practical issues like housing, debt and benefits.
- The Samaritans – available 24 hours a day by telephone or email, to talk about anything that's upsetting you.
- Local Mind – local Minds offer a range of support services in local areas.

(See 'Useful contacts' on p.33)

Many charities also run telephone or online support services. See Mind's online booklets *How to stay safe online* and *The Mind guide to crisis services*.

Peer support

When you experience a mental health problem it can feel as if no-one understands. Peer support brings together people who've had similar experiences to support each other. Many students find that meeting others with experience of mental health difficulties helps them feel less alone and makes it easier to talk about their own mental health.

- Your university might run peer support groups on campus, in your halls or on your course.
- You can usually self-refer to peer support programmes, so you don't need to see a GP first or have a diagnosis.
- Student Minds run peer support programmes and mental health campaign groups at universities across the UK (see 'Useful contacts' p.33).
- You can also access online peer support through communities like Elefriends (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33 and Mind's online booklet *How to stay safe online* for more information).

Friends and family

University friends and housemates

If your friends or housemates have been worried about how you are doing, talking to them might be a relief for all of you. If you are worried about how they will react, talk to them about this – they may appreciate your advice on how they can help and what they can do to be supportive. Student Minds provides advice and support for students supporting friends (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

●● *Telling people around me that I'm struggling will help, as they can help me feel happy.* ●●

Friends and family back home

It can be useful to get support from old friends and your family. Try:

- using email or social media – even quick forms of contact, like forwarding jokes, allow you to keep in touch

- writing a letter or card – these can feel more personal and be nice to receive
- taking time to talk – set aside a time each week to chat to a close friend or family
- inviting friends to stay so you can show them around – they may then do the same for you
- keeping people up-to-date with what you are doing, so they feel they are still part of your life – you don't have to tell them everything, just let them know what's going on.

What if I become unwell?

If you become unwell, there are lots of options you can consider.

See Mind's booklets *The Mind guide to seeking help for your mental health* and *The Mind guide to crisis services*, and 'What support can I get?' on p.23 for more information on getting support.

Support on your course

If you do become unwell, it's important for you (or someone you trust) to explain the situation to your academic supervisor or tutor as soon as possible. Even if you have previously explained that you have a mental health problem, they may not be aware that you're feeling worse. The sooner you let them know, the easier it is for them to help you get support with your academic work.

You may be able to:

- receive special dispensation when your work is marked
- extend deadlines
- re-sit exams.

Take time out from your course

Each university is different in the way it approaches taking time off from studying. It may be possible to:

- defer the course for a time
- repeat a term or year.

Your university may need a letter from your doctor to explain how your mental health is affecting your studies.

Take a flexible approach to studying

Your university might be able to make adjustments to how you study. For example, you may be able to:

- complete your degree part-time
- have longer deadlines for coursework
- get more time in exams.

It may help to start by thinking about what you would need to make it easier to continue your studies.

Think about alternatives

You might feel that continuing your course isn't right for you, and that's okay. It could be useful to think about some alternatives:

- trying a different course or location (see 'How can I choose my course?' on p.5 for things to consider)
- studying a vocational course or apprenticeship
- taking a gap year
- starting work.

Not Going To Uni has advice and information about alternatives to university (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

Who can I talk to about my options?

It may be helpful to have a chat with someone impartial about your options, even if just to help get it clear in your own mind about what you think would help.

- Your academic supervisor or tutor should be able to help you to understand your university's policy for taking time out and to consider how you could take a more flexible approach to your studies.
- Your Students' Union Advice Service or welfare office can provide impartial advice.
- Your university's disability service can support you to think about taking time out or taking a more flexible approach to your studies.

What happens when I finish my course?

Preparing for graduation and moving on after studying can be both exciting and daunting. It's a good idea to think about the steps you can take to help you manage the move out of university and look after your mental health.

Preparing for life after university

It is completely normal to have no idea what you want to do after university. This can feel stressful, or affect how you feel about yourself, but it's important to remember that many people take months or even years to work out their next steps.

How do I decide what to do next?

- If you are studying a course that could lead onto a specific career, relevant societies will provide information about career options in your field.
- Make use of your university or college careers service. This is a great place to help you start thinking about what you might like to do when you finish studying.

- The National Careers Service has advice and information on planning a career (see 'Useful contacts' on p.33).

Remember: lots of graduates describe the process of finding a career as trial and error. Most students don't have a road map planned out – you don't need one!

Maintaining your support network

When you graduate, it is likely that the support networks you have at university may no longer be as easily available.

- Stay in touch with university friends – everyone finds this transition tricky, and hearing from an old friend is reassuring.
- Try online support – you can access this wherever you move to. See Mind's online booklet *How to stay safe online* for more information.
- Speak your local Mind to find out more about the support in your new area.

Arranging your healthcare

If you are moving away from your university town and are currently receiving support from your GP or an NHS service, you will need to plan how the move might affect the support you receive.

- Visit your current GP and think about the process of transferring your care to a new GP.
- Find out where you can register with a new GP.
- If you're in touch with your community mental health team (CMHT) or crisis team, make sure you let them know that you're moving and find out how you can access the support you want in your new home.

Mental health at work

If you're starting work, it's important to think about how you'll manage your mental health in this new environment. Time to Change looks at the pros and cons of talking to your manager about mental health. You can read about other people's experiences of making the transition out of university and into work on the Student Minds blog or Mind blog.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.33 and Mind's booklet *How to be mentally healthy at work* for more information.

For friends and family

This section is for friends and family who want to help someone they know with a mental health problem who is studying or considering becoming a student.

Becoming a student involves many changes for friends and family. There are lots of things you can do to help manage these changes.

- Keep in touch – make the effort to be the one who stays in contact. Even if they appear very busy, they are likely to appreciate the effort.
- Make time to be together – visiting them at university can give you the opportunity to understand more about their new life and feel more engaged. For some, university life can be busy, so finding dates that work might require patience and flexibility.
- Accept that things may change – they are likely to have made new friends, or have new commitments that take up their time.
- Ask them how they are doing – it doesn't have to be a serious conversation about mental health, but most people will appreciate being asked.

●● *Be there for me to talk to, and give me advice.* ●●

- Take an interest – try asking them about what they're working on at the moment or about their course.
- Give them space – if they have left home for the first time, remember that being a student is part of a process of gaining independence and growing up. It is natural that they don't want to tell you everything.
- Offer practical help – offer help with a routine task, such as preparing or cooking food. This sort of thing will really be

appreciated, and save them time and stress.

- Remember that studying can feel like a job. Studying can take up a lot of time, involve long hours in lectures or busy work placements. Try to understand that they can feel under a lot of pressure, and offer them support.

●● *Understand that university isn't a walk in the park for everyone and it isn't necessarily the 'time of your life'.* ●●

- Look after yourself – supporting someone else can have an impact on your own mental health. For more information, see:
 - Mind's online booklet *How to cope as a carer*.
 - Student Minds' resource *Look After Your Mate*
 - Carers UK also offers information, advice and support for people caring for someone with a disability.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.33.

Useful contacts

Access Diploma

web: accesstohe.ac.uk

Information about Access to Higher Education Diploma courses.

Carers UK

tel: 0808 808 7777

web: carersuk.org

email: advice@carersuk.org

Independent information and support for carers.

Citizens Advice

helplines:

08444 111 444 (England)

0844 477 2020 (Wales)

TextRelay service: 08444 111 445

web: citizensadvice.org.uk

Confidential advice on a range of issues.

Drink Aware

web: drinkaware.co.uk

Information about managing alcohol safely.

Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk

A supportive community which provides online peer support for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Frank

web: talktofrank.com

Information and advice about drugs.

The Money Charity

email: hello@themoneycharity.org.uk

web: themoneycharity.org.uk

National Careers Service

nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk

Information and advice on planning your career.

National Union of Students

tel: 0845 5210 262

web: nus.org.uk

Promoting and defending the rights of students.

NHS service finder

web: nhs.uk/service-search

Search facility which allows you to look for a health service, including a GP, in your area.

NHS Choices – Student Health

web: nhs.uk/Livewell/studenthealth

Advice on student health issues.

Useful contacts

Nightline

web: nightline.ac.uk

Lists contact information for support and listening services run in universities and colleges across the UK.

Not Going To Uni

web: notgoingtouni.co.uk

Information and advice about alternatives to university.

Open University

web: open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy

Information on study skills.

Samaritans

helpline: 116 123 (freephone)

email: jo@samaritans.org

web: samaritans.org

Emotional support for anyone in distress.

Students Against Depression

web: studentsagainstdepression.org

Information and support for students experiencing depression.

Student Minds

email: hello@studentminds.org.uk

web: studentminds.org.uk

Information about student mental health and local peer support programmes.

The Student Room

web: thestudentroom.co.uk

Online student forum for students to discuss universities, health, lifestyle and relationships.

Time to Change

web: time-to-change.org.uk

National campaign to challenge stigma around mental health.

YoungMinds

helpline: 0808 802 5544

web: youngminds.org.uk

Information for both parents and young people about mental health.

UCAS

web: ucas.com

Information about applying to university and getting funding.

UMHAN

web: umhan.com

National network of University Mental Health Advisers.

Unipol

web: unipol.org.uk

The student housing charity.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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We welcome feedback on our publications. To give feedback on this booklet, email us at mindinfoteam@mind.org.uk

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web: mind.org.uk

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